

The Incredible Egg Hunt -- Mapping Forage Fish in the Northwest Straits (2001-2003)

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Forage fish are small, pelagic organisms that are a principal food for coastal and estuarine fish populations. Living in relative obscurity in nearshore waters, forage fish spawn high on sandy beaches, laying eggs indistinguishable from sand grains. Little has been known about their habitats or distribution, despite their critical importance to species such as salmonids and shorebirds. The Northwest Straits Commission, Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife, and nine collaborating partners co-sponsored a three-year effort to sample and map forage fish spawning beaches on hundreds of miles of Puget Sound shorelines. Led by DFW biologist Dan Penttila, teams of citizen-volunteers and agency staff sampled thousands of sites under a protocol designed to detect Pacific sand lance and surf smelt spawn deposition. GIS datasets are now available to local planners and others that accurately locate miles of spawning habitats. This project was grant-sponsored by the Salmon Recovery Funding Board, the Northwest Straits Commission, SeaDoc, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.